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**Lake Country Heritage and Cultural Society**

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**Social Studies Grade 2 - Lesson 3: The Oyama Isthmus and Canal**

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| **Learning Experience** |
| Reading the history of the Oyama Isthmus and the creation of the Oyama Canal and visiting the area to further explore human interactions  with the environment. |

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| **Intention** | To look at the Oyama Isthmus and see how the environment plays a role in the relationship between the area and the people who use it. |
| **Objective** | To have students recognize how different relationships with the environment can affect decisions and the development of the land. |
| **Guidance** | **The Oyama Isthmus**  “The Railroad” was the name used on the earliest colonial maps, before the settlement in Lake Country, to refer to the isthmus at Oyama. The term certainly did not refer to any European-made feature; it had to refer to either a natural or an Okanagan Syilx structure. What was it?  Until the late eighteenth century, the First People’s, maintained winter villages on Okanagan Lake, the major one being Penticton. Okanagan hunting, fishing and gathering activities occurred over a wide territory, including the littoral of Okanagan Lake and Long Lake (a former name for the combined Kalamalka and Wood lakes). The Okanagan Syilx people transported the surplus animal and vegetable products that they had gathered and processed during the summer and fall to Penticton where they were used for winter consumption. Heavy goods such as loads of dried venison, fish and berries were transported there from as far away as the Coldstream valley and Silver Star mountain. Water transport, using dugout canoes or rafts, was the most efficient means of conducting this long-distance transport of bulk goods.  [Oyama isthmus](https://www.lakecountrymuseum.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Oyama-isthmus_RadLab1.jpg)  (the Oyama isthmus, looking south.)  In a pre-horse economy, what was the most efficient route over which to transport heavy goods?  Water transport from the Coldstream to the Oyama isthmus was straight forward, but then the canoes and their loads had to be hiked over the isthmus and up four feet in elevation to float on Wood (formerly Pelmewash) Lake. We know that the Okanagan Syilx people used corduroy or logs to bring canoes over the mud on to land at Okanagan Landing.1  It seems likely that they used a “rail road” as a slip to pass between the lakes. The Syilx name for the Oyama isthmus was *acyuʔc̕us* (Ac yutz oos) meaning a narrow crossing with thickly entwined willows (or anything closely intertwined).  “The Railroad” likely referred to a rail (corduroy) road made by the Okanagan people by cutting and laying down closely intertwined poles or willows to facilitate their crossing of the isthmus.  The easiest connection between Wood and Okanagan lakes was over the saddle in the mountain range at the south end of Wood Lake. Last year an archaeological team found evidence of a small Okanagan village located at the south west corner of Wood Lake, just where the goods would have been loaded on the backs of Okanagan people and packed over to Okanagan Lake.  Undoubtedly the early settlers also used this well-trodden Okanagan Syilx trail and later widened it to become Oceola Road.  The Railroad was an important link in this transport route connecting the North Okanagan to Penticton.  (Excerpt taken from the Lake Country Museum [Website](https://www.lakecountrymuseum.com/why-was-oyama-named-the-railroad-in-the-early-colonial-era/#top))   1. H. B. Kennard. “Indian Place Names.” *Third Annual Report of the Okanagan Historical Society*, 1929, p. 16.   Oyama isthmus  [*Oyama isthmus between Wood Lake and Long (Kalamalka) Lake*](https://www.lakecountrymuseum.com/the-railroad-oyama-isthmus/)  Before the navigation canal was built in 1908, a creek drained Wood Lake into Long (Kalamalka) Lake.  Wood Lake was initially four feet higher than Kalamalka, perhaps five or six feet higher during the spring freshet. In some years the water gushed down the creek making passage across the isthmus exceedingly dangerous. Two news items in the Vernon News illustrate:  “There came near a drowning accident last week at the creek between Wood’s Lake and Long Lake, at the place known as the “railway.” J. Shore attempted to ford the creek, which is much swollen, and his horses were swept off their feet, and he was carried down for some distance by the stream, getting out with much difficulty. A road and bridge is badly needed by the settlers of that vicinity, and we trust that it will be among the first work of its kind after this year.”  1902-06-05  Two weeks later the newspaper reported another incident. “A. Cary had a narrow escape last week from losing a valuable horse in the creek at the “railroad,” between Long Lake and Wood’s Lake….” 1902-06-05  [(Taken from the Lake Country Museum and Archives website)](https://www.lakecountrymuseum.com/the-canal/)  **The Canal**  By 1908, a canal was dug at the end of the isthmus, connecting Kalamalka and Wood Lakes and allowing boat access between the two lakes. The canal was of great benefit to the early settlers, with produce shipped by boat from Wood Lake to the north end of Kalamalka Lake at Vernon, and logs towed through the canal by boats such as the Maud Allan. A bridge was built for traffic to cross the canal, engineered in a style known as “camel-back” which allowed boats to pass underneath.  (Excerpt taken from *Spirit of Lake Country: Heritage and Culture,* 2011, Lake Country Museum and Archives)    Oyama Canal Bridge – image source Lake Country Museum and Archives, Dorthea Allison Collection.  Loading fruit at canal wharf [Image source: Lake Country Museum and Archives](https://www.lakecountrymuseum.com/loading-fruit-at-the-canal-dock/)  After the Canal was built, the lake levels dropped by about 4 feet exposing a natural shelf along the lake. |
| **Activity** | **Field Trip:**  [Kaloya Regional Park in Lake Country](https://www.regionaldistrict.com/your-services/parks-services/parks-and-trails/16-kaloya-regional-park.aspx) - 16061 Trask Rd.  The Oyama Canal and Kaloya Regional Park are both at the Ithmus. Both have historical significance to the Lake Country area and are excellent  locations to take the students for outings and exploration. Nearby is the rail trail and Oyama traditional school.  **Discussion Prompt Suggestions:**   * How does development affect the environment for the Isthmus? * What do you think were some of the benefits of making the canal between the two lakes? What were some of the consequences? * Should there be a concept of “acceptable consequences” when it comes to land development? If so, what is acceptable? If not, how do we balance needs of a community with respect to the environment? |
| **Further Inquiry** | **Suggested Field Trip:**  [The Okanagan Rail Trail.](https://www.kelowna.ca/roads-transportation/active-transportation/okanagan-rail-trail) The rail trail has sections along the Oyama side which were originally part of the railroad mentioned in this lesson. It is a great area to take the students on a walk and has heritage markers along certain locations of the trail that tell more of Lake Country’s history.  [The Oyama Community Hall](https://www.oyamahall.ca/)The community hall in Oyama has been there for the community since 1914. Close to the Isthmus and to Kaloya regional park, it is an excellent spot to visit and to see the heritage marker the Lake Country Museum and Archives has created that tells more history of the  Oyama area.    [The Lake Country Museum and Archives](https://www.lakecountrymuseum.com/)  The Museum has a wide range of exhibits and activities for your class to take advantage of. There is also a playground and field behind the building and the lake nearby that students can make use of for various activities.  There may be the opportunity for a guest lecturer to visit your classroom or be present at the museum with the knowledge of more local history stories. If interested, please contact the Museum ahead of time. |